

There is Neither Old Nor Young? Early Christianity and Ancient Ideologies of Age

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Instructions given to the ‘older’ and ‘younger’ in some early Christian texts prompt inquiry into the rationale for this polarity and its ideological freight. Demographics suggest that the adult population rarely contained more than two generations, and comparative study indicates that where age was marked these categories usually sufficed. Their ambiguity and flexibility made them suited to ideological deployment, legitimating the power of the ‘older’. 1 Peter, 1 Clement, the Pastorals, and Polycarp demonstrate this phenomenon in early Christianity, with 1 Tim 4.12 and Ignatius *Mag.* 3.1 as exceptions that prove the rule. But why are age qualifications absent from the authentic Paulines?

Considerable research has been focused in recent decades on gender differentials in early Christianity, alongside differences in ethnicity, wealth, legal status, and social location. By contrast, very little attention has been paid to differentials in age, despite the fact that several early Christian texts make explicit comment on generational divides. The instructions in these texts, both within and outwith the NT, refer to ‘the older’ and ‘the younger’ in terms loaded with moral and political assumptions; and although such age-group relations clearly had structural significance for early Christian communities, it is rarely discussed how they participated in larger cultural systems of value and power. Recent discussion of the development of offices in the early church, including Alastair Campbell’s book on *The Elders*, has re-opened the question of the relationship between office, honour, and seniority in age,¹ but there is still much to be learned in this area, not least from the recent outpouring of classical scholarship on the life-cycle in antiq-

¹ R. A. Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994). Among other things, this succeeded in overturning the old consensus that early Christians took over the ‘office’ of ‘elder’ specifically from Judaism. His survey of ‘the status of older people in the Graeco-Roman world’ (79–90) is suggestive, though the focus of his study is on how the title of ‘elder’ developed within early Christian churches.

uity and on the place of the 'older' generation within it.² Given the breadth of this topic, I shall confine myself to literature broadly in the Pauline tradition, but the results could be relevant to those working in other fields.

We may start with some observations and a few simple questions. By the end of the first century, leaders of the Christian movement, in many of its branches, were called *πρεσβύτεροι*, as witnessed by texts as diverse as James (5.14), 1 Peter (5.1, 5), Acts (11.30; 14.23; 15.2, 4, etc.), the Pastorals (1 Tim 5.17; Titus 1.5–9), and, perhaps, the shorter Johannine epistles (2 John 1; 3 John 1). What is more, in a range of texts (1 Peter; the Pastorals; 1 *Clement*; Polycarp *Philippians*), instructions are given to adult members of the church using the simple polarity of 'older' and 'younger' (usually *πρεσβύτεροι* and *νεώτεροι*; see below). Normally in such texts the comparative adjective is used, but sometimes the positive form is found (*νέαι* or the noun *πρεσβῦται*; cf. Titus 2.2–4); in either case it is implied that, between them, these labels embrace the whole adult congregation.³ What do such apparently vague terms mean and why is this binary sufficient to cover everyone? How did one know whether one was in the 'older' or 'younger' category? Was it possi-

2 On the life-cycle approach, see, e.g., M. Harlow and R. Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2002). The upsurge of interest in old age in Western societies has helped spawn a new focus on the representations and realities of old age in both Greek and Roman antiquity. See, e.g., K. Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2003); T. G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003). On age in early Christianity, see C. Gnlika, 'Greisenalter', *RAC* 12:995–1094 and idem, *Aetas Spirituality: die Überwindung der natürlichen Altersstufen als Ideal frühchristlichen Lebens* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1972). For bibliography (up to 1989) see E. Eyben, 'Old Age in Greco-Roman Antiquity and Early Christianity', *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature* (ed. T. M. Falkner and J. de Luce; Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989) 230–51.

3 The comparative *πρεσβύτεροι* is used in the NT as follows: a) on its own, with reference to: the 'elders' of the Jews (e.g., Matt 26.3); the 'elders' of the church (e.g., Acts 14.23; 1 Tim 5.17; 2 John 1 [singular]; Jas 5.14); 'elders' as general figures of authority (e.g., Matt 15.2); the 'elders' in the heavenly courtroom (e.g., Rev 4.4); b) in conjunction with *νεώτεροι* in address to congregations: 1 Pet 5.1–5; 1 Tim 5.1–2 (both male and female forms); with reference to 'older' and 'younger' brothers (Luke 15.12, 25); c) in conjunction with *νεανίσκοι* (Acts 2.17). The noun *πρεσβῦται* / *πρεσβύτερες* is used in conjunction with *νεώτεροι* / *νέαι* in instructions to the church (Titus 2.2–6), or on its own (Phlm 9, singular). The comparative *νεώτεροι* / *νεώτεροι* is found sometimes in a comparative context (in contrast to *πρεσβύτεροι*, Luke 15.12; 1 Pet 5.5; 1 Tim 5.1–2; or simply to *πρεσβῦται* / *πρεσβύτερες*, Titus 2.2–6; or in implicit contrast with the widows aged 60 and over, 1 Tim 5.11, 14; cf. John 21.18 [ὅτε ἦς νεώτερος in contrast to ὅταν γηράσῃς]), but sometimes not (Acts 5.6, identical in meaning to *νεανίσκοι*, Acts 5.10). *νέαι* has a comparative sense, though not a comparative form, in Titus 2.4 (juxtaposed with *νεώτεροι* Titus 2.6). These facts suggest that the terms 'young' and 'younger' are in most contexts synonymous (as are 'old man' and 'older man'); in other words, even the non-comparative forms generally carry an implicit comparative sense, since such age labels are almost always defined by *comparison with* one another.

ble to be neither, but something in between? Just as importantly, what ideological freight do such terms carry – what moral and social expectations would have clustered around them, and what ideological work are they being required to perform in Christian texts? And if these were, as we shall see, common terms for the totality of an adult population, why do we *not* find them within the authentic Pauline letters – neither the term *πρεσβύτερος* nor indeed any reference to people's age, beyond the mention of the centenarian Abraham (Rom 4.19) and Paul's reference to himself, in Philemon 9, as a *πρεσβύτες*?⁴ Is this absence of age vocabulary a purely accidental phenomenon, or does Paul's silence on age differentials suggest a different social configuration, even a different theological anthropology?

1. The Binary of 'The Old' and 'The Young'

Let us begin with some demographic facts – or at least reconstructions.⁵ In the most recent estimates, the high rates of infant mortality put average life-expectancy at birth in the range of 20–30 years. Of course, for those who survived into their teens, the future looked better, but the number of people living beyond the age of 60 was still, compared to the modern Western world, extremely low. According to estimates used by Parkin, if we set average life-expectancy at birth at 25, and if we take a cross section of the population of the early Roman empire, we

4 Bentley's emendation (to *πρεσβεύτες*) has been rightly dismissed by Birdsall; see J. N. Birdsall, 'πρεσβύτες in Philemon 9: A Study in Conjectural Emendation', *NTS* 39 (1993) 625–30. It is still just possible that *πρεσβύτες* could be interpreted to mean 'ambassador' (so J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon* [London: Macmillan, 5th ed., 1880] 338–9; M. Barth and H. Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 321–3), but there is no difficulty in giving the term its normal meaning 'old man', which makes sense as a ground for Paul's appeal and should probably be preferred (so, e.g., P. Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon* [EKK; Zürich: Benziger, 1975] 37–8).

5 The demography of ancient societies – based on the sparse record of tombstones, census returns from Egypt, and the analysis of skeletons – is a precarious science, which depends in large part on the slightly fuller record of pre-industrial societies in parallel conditions; see T. Parkin, *Demography and Roman Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992) and R. P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) 9–69. These utilise the model life tables of Coale and Demeny which assess age-distributions of stable populations according to varying estimates of life-expectancy at birth. It is generally accepted that the closest model to the conditions of the ancient world is Coale-Demeny² West Level 3 (female), with life-expectancy at birth averaged at 25; see Parkin, *Old Age*, 36–56, 280 (table 3); Saller, *Patriarchy*, 22–5. But the field is fraught with difficulty; see the critique by W. Scheidel, 'Roman Age Structure: Evidence and Models', *JRS* 91 (2001) 1–26; idem, ed., *Debating Roman Demography* (Leiden: Brill, 2001). Scheidel doubts the value of the Coale-Demeny models (except for highly schematic calculations of kinship structures), and emphasises the likelihood of greater adult mortality (due to disease and malnutrition). The following figures may, thus, overestimate the percentage of the population who lived to and beyond the age of 60.

would find about 60% of the population to be under the age of 30; about a third (33%) between the ages of 30 and 59; and only about 7% over the age of 60 (dropping to 4% over the age of 65).⁶ Of course, some individuals are known to have lived into their 70s, even their 80s and 90s, but plenty of sources indicate that people who died in their 60s would be considered to have lived a full life.⁷ If we think this through in terms of generations, the results are interesting. Parkin reckons that the average age of marriage for men in the Roman world was 30, for women 15.⁸ That would mean that by the time he reached 10, a boy would have a father aged 40 and a paternal grandfather, if he was very lucky, aged 70. When the boy reached 20, his father would be 50, and his paternal grandfather would be alive only if he had survived till the age of 80. Even if we reduce the average age at marriage for men to 25, the paternal grandfather would have to live to 70 to witness his grandson's twentieth birthday – only likely, as we have seen, for a tiny percentage of the population.⁹ Thus by the time a young male began to become socially and politically active, he would have had, for all intents and purposes, only one generation above him – even his *maternal* grandfather would be in the thin bracket of 60-year olds.¹⁰ Adult life was, for practically everyone, a two-generation phenomenon.¹¹ To put this in other terms, there were too few people in the 60+ age-bracket for them to constitute a socially significant age-class of their own.

6 Parkin, *Old Age*, 280, Table 3; the aggregation of the relevant percentage figures at Level 3 (life expectancy at birth of 25) is more precisely: 59.64%; 33.38%; and 6.98%, dropping to 4.07% over 65. But the precise figures give a spurious sense of accuracy, and if these tables are of any value at all (see previous note), they are useful only for giving a very rough sense of possible age profiles. We should perhaps be content with a rough sense that only 5%–8% of the population was over the age of 60.

7 Livy (*apud* Seneca *Suas.* 6.22) considered Cicero's death at 63 not premature, while Statius thought his father's death (at 65) neither early nor late (*Silv.* 5.3.252–4).

8 Parkin, *Old Age*, 51–2. There is some evidence that in elite Roman families men may have married earlier (ca. 25). For the average age of marriage for Roman men, see R. P. Saller, 'Men's Age at Marriage and its Consequences in the Roman Family', *CP* 82 (1987) 20–35.

9 It is possible that the marriage age for Jewish men was lower (as young as 18: see *m. Aboth* 5.21 and the anecdote of the married 18 year-old in *b. Ber.* 28a, cited below; cf. 1QSa 1.9–11 [not below 20]; I am grateful to Dr. Roger Aus for advice on this point and for reference to the rabbinic sources gathered in Strack-Billerbeck 2.373–5). But it is not clear if this was so in the Diaspora; and, in any case, most of the churches addressed in the texts here studied were predominantly Gentile.

10 Saller's tables for senatorial families (*Patriarchy*, 54–9, Table 3.2) give precise figures using Coale-Demeny² Level 3 West: only 13% of men aged 20 would have had a living grandfather of either sort, only 3% a living paternal grandfather.

11 This was complicated, of course, by the different ages at marriage of men and women: a man's father-in-law was likely to be in the generation space between himself and his father; see Harlow and Laurence, *Growing Up*, 92–103. The point here is that there was no significant presence of a generation *above* that of his father or father-in-law.

This already alerts us to the fact that age-categories, in antiquity as today, are the product of history and culture. While we may each count our own age in years (with more or less accuracy or honesty),¹² the age-categories into which we place ourselves, or are placed by others, are manifestly social constructs. In the Greek and Roman worlds, at puberty a boy became a 'youth' (νεανίας; *adulescens*) and a girl, in most cases, a wife; thereafter there were no *physiological* transitions which demarcated the remaining course of a human life.¹³ In the midst of the gradual and constant process of ageing, stages in life, if they are marked at all, have to be culturally imposed.¹⁴ In ancient narratives – histories and novels – the age of characters is often, in fact, *unmarked*; it is either unknown or irrelevant to the story being told. Where it is marked, it bears some narrative significance, and it is striking how those individuals whose age is noted are generally labelled either 'young' or 'old'. In Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*, where 15 of the 45 characters are classified in age, all these are identified as either 'young' or 'old': 'young' where they are beautiful, marriageable, or full of passion (e.g., 1.2: Habrocomes and Anthia; 1.13: Corymbus; 2.3: Manto and Rhode), and 'old' where they are soon to die or in stereotypical roles, such as the elderly tutor, the retired soldier, or the garrulous old woman (e.g., 1.14: Habrocomes' elderly τροφεύς; 3.9: the garrulous Chryson; 3.12: Araxus, the former soldier).¹⁵ There are no 'middle-aged' people noted here: *their* age would contribute nothing to the narrative or to their character profile. In Chariton's *Callirhoe*, the same is true (the young hero and heroine, 1.1; the half-dead elderly father, 3.5; the wise elderly philosopher, 8.3) – or, rather, the one exception, Dionysius, proves the rule: he is introduced as a man 'in the prime of life' (ἡλικία καθεστώς, 1.12.6), only so that when he falls madly in love with Callirhoe he chides himself for being immature, behaving like an adolescent (2.3–4). In Luke–Acts the narrative profile is similar: children, 'youths', and 'old

12 There is evidence in antiquity that individuals were likely to know their birthdays (for celebrations or astrological calculations) better than the exact year of their birth (Parkin, *Old Age*, 33–4); it is common in epitaphs for ages to be rounded to the nearest five; see R. P. Duncan-Jones, 'Age-Rounding, Illiteracy and Social Differentiation in the Roman Empire', *Chiron* 7 (1977) 333–53.

13 The menopause is a possible exception for women. Though it is never explicitly noted as a moment of category-transition, there are some indications of changes in attitude to women once they were considered infertile (Harlow and Laurence, *Growing Up*, 127–9). The rules on the support of widows over 60 in 1 Tim 5.3–16 may be a case in point ('younger widows' are expected to marry and bear children, 5.11–15); although 60 seems a high threshold for the menopause, it is not unparalleled in antiquity (Soranus *Gyn.* 1.6.20).

14 The point is widely recognised in the sociology and anthropology of ageing. For a study of African social systems, in which physiological and 'structural' age are clearly distinct phenomena, see B. Bernardi, *Age Class Systems: Social Institutions and Politics Based on Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985).

15 I am grateful to Professor Tomas Hägg for pointing me to the Greek novels for evidence of the marking, or non-marking, of age.

people' are noted, very occasionally with their exact age (e.g., Anna: Luke 2.36–7); but most people remain unmarked in age.¹⁶ Not everyone has to be put into an age bracket, but when they are, the terms 'young' and 'old' are the ones most frequently used and most culturally significant.

This conclusion is largely corroborated elsewhere. Certain specialised discourses might divide the lifespan into precise units, or mark exact age for the sake of legal entitlement or obligation. Medical and astronomical calculations, for instance, might divide a life into 7-year or 9-year units;¹⁷ enrolment in the army operated with lower and upper age-limits;¹⁸ taxation sometimes operated in age-bands, deftly manipulated by the tax-payers;¹⁹ and for the holding of political office an age-qualification might be legislated, and an upper limit (for 'retirement') discussed, though not necessarily applied.²⁰ But outside these special arenas, and, it seems, for most spheres of ordinary life, a simple binary was sufficient: after childhood and a loosely defined 'youth' (for men until their mid-20s), the free population (both male and female) was divided into two categories, the 'young(er)' and 'old(er)', with no clearly defined boundary between them, or rather, only such demarcation as fitted the rhetorical or political interests of those who created it.²¹

16 How old were Joseph, Herod, Pilate, Stephen, Barnabas, Philip? The question is of no interest to Luke. The advanced ages of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1.7, 18, 36) are important to the narrative, as is the youthfulness of the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7.12–14) and of the boy Jesus (Luke 2.42). Anna's great age (2.36–7), with her long period of widowhood, demonstrates her purity in reception of prophecy; the age of the lame man healed by Peter and John indicates how miraculous is his healing (Acts 4.23). It is not entirely clear why Luke marks the age of Jesus as 'about 30' at the start of his ministry (Luke 3.23); there may be echoes of Joseph (Gen 41.46) or David (2 Sam 5.4), or an allusion to the age of Moses (32) 'when he began to instruct Israel in Egypt' (*Num. Rab.* Naso 14.18 on Num 7.85 [suggested to me by Dr. Aus]; but cf. *Exod. Rab.* 1.27, 30).

17 E.g., Hippocrates' seven ages of humankind (*apud Philo Opif.* 105, with a 21-year period for the age of 'manhood' [ἀνήρ]); on similar divisions see Parkin, *Old Age*, 16–19, noting their marginal significance.

18 Aulus Gellius *Noct. Att.* 10.28, recording Roman practice (enrolment at 17; entering the status of *seniores* at 46).

19 For the evidence from Roman Egypt regarding liturgy-obligations and the poll tax, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 138–72.

20 For the rules and their application regarding the Roman senate, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 96–128.

21 Thus, although Philo knows Hippocrates' scheme (*Opif.* 105), he generally refers to the adult population in these two categories (see below). It is therefore mistaken to assume that one may use Hippocrates' (or others') life-stage schemas as means to determine precisely when Paul or others could classify themselves as 'old' (pace J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1996] 1–4, on Phlm 9). Slaves can also be marked in literature as both old and young, though in a social sense they have the marginal status of a 'child' (παῖς); see T. Wiedemann, 'Servi senes: The Role of Old Slaves at Rome', *Polis* 8 (1996) 275–93.

It may strike us as odd that there are only these two categories: it was very rare for either Greeks or Romans to talk of a 'middle age' of mature adulthood before one became 'old'.²² Aristotle did advance something like this notion, but only because he wanted to define a golden mean between the excesses of youth, on the one hand, and the miseries of old age, on the other (*Rhet.* 2.12–14 [1388b31–1390b13]). In the course of this definition Aristotle distinguishes between the maturity of the body (at the age of 30–35) and the maturity of the soul (at the age of 49); but using two different ages in the definition of 'maturity' (ἀκμή) makes the schema practically unworkable.²³ Elsewhere adult society was divided, in a neat polarity, into 'the young' and 'the old', with 'old' (or 'older') applicable to parents or senior politicians in their 40s and 50s as well as to the tiny percentage of those who lived into their 60s or beyond. Occasionally the term *senium* is used by Roman authors, in distinction from *senectus*, to describe what we might term 'senility'.²⁴ But in general when our texts talk about 'the old' or 'the older', we should resist thinking of those considered in the West (until recently) 'of retirement age'; the term could apply to anyone distinguishable from a younger generation.²⁵

The categories are interestingly flexible and uncertain. When did men or women become 'old'? Only when the next generation so defined them, or when it suited the 'older' to categorise themselves in this way.²⁶ According to Xenophon (*Mem.* 1.2.35), when Socrates was accused of corrupting 'the young', he had to ask his critics who counted as 'young' (νέοι); anyone, he was told, not yet wise enough to serve on the Council (βουλή), that is anyone under the age of 30. The

22 On Greek usage of just these two categories, see R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Life* (London: Duckworth, 1990) 205–6, 242–3.

23 Aristotle's categories are νεότης, ἀκμή and γῆρας. The young are over-passionate, over-heated, and naïve; the old are cold, suspicious, cowardly, and mean; in between, by the principle of μηδὲν ἄγαν, are those 'in their prime'. But the contrasts are artificially schematic, and the paucity of comment on 'middle age' (beyond its falling between the opposite extremes) suggests it was a category of limited value. Artemidorus sometimes uses a four-age scheme (child; youth; grown man [ἀνὴρ]; old man, 1.50; cf. 2.44; 4.10), but not always (cf. 1.78), and it is striking that the third category (ἀνὴρ) does not itself signify age. Terms for middle age (*constans aetas*; *aetas virilis*; *medium tempus*) are notably rare in Latin, even when the lifespan is divided into four or more stages; see E. Eyben, 'Die Einteilung des menschlichen Lebens im römischen Altertum', *Rheinisches Museum* 116 (1973) 150–90; Parkin, *Old Age*, 21–2.

24 T. G. Parkin, 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Elderly Members of the Roman Family', *The Roman Family in Italy* (ed. B. Rawson and P. Weaver; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 123–48, esp. 141–8.

25 This is true even of the Latin term *senex*: as Parkin insists, 'one cannot and should not define general terms like *senex* by a minimum number of years' (*Old Age*, 25); on the distinction in Roman law between *minores* and *maiores* see *idem*, *Old Age*, 93–5.

26 According to Livy (30.30.10–11), Hannibal at the age of 44 called himself a *senex* in contrast to the *adulescentia* of Scipio (aged 34); but Cicero, looking back, can call himself at the time of the Catalinarian conspiracy (when he was 44) an *adulescens* (*Phil.* 2.46.118).

fact that he had to ask the question shows that the term was ill-defined, and it is this very lack of definition, together with the neat polarity of the two opposing categories, young and old, that makes these labels so rhetorically useful. Precisely because they were ambiguous, such terms were malleable and could be put to all kinds of prejudicial use. And that leads us to enquire into the politics of these categories: if 'older' and 'younger' do not have a precise physiological sense, but are nonetheless in frequent use, what ideologies are they being made to serve?

2. Ideologies of Age

In antiquity, as today, youth and age carried their own particular stereotypes, both positive and negative. Old age is notoriously easy to ridicule. The stock image of the decrepit old man, deaf and losing his memory, with tottering limbs, bald head, and drivelling nose – or the old woman, bent over, wrinkled, and with toothless gums – is common in literature and art (most memorably in Aristophanes' plays and Juvenal's *Satire* 10.188–288).²⁷ Besides these physical traits, the older generation are often depicted as long-winded, opinionated, carping, slow-witted, miserly, and ridiculous when they pursue love-affairs.²⁸ The old or older, of course, see things differently: from their perspective – and this is a notion ubiquitous in the ancient world – with age come prudence, moderation, and the wisdom of experience.²⁹ The young, who can be portrayed in certain contexts as vigorous, beautiful, and bursting with sex-appeal, can also be viewed, by the older, as wilful, greedy, ambitious, sex-crazed, and emotionally unstable. And because the population divides into two groups, one can charge men even in their 30s with the immaturity and indiscretions of 'youth', or conversely, label a 45-year old a *senex*, and load against him all the associated negative connotations.

Such stereotypes are not socially or politically innocent: they enter into the structuring of power, providing rationalisations for its unequal distribution across the generations. In the domestic sphere, the appeal for the young to respect their elders is as common as, and frequently tied to, the expectation that children obey their parents. Summarising the Jewish law, but in line with all ancient moralists, Josephus twins the honouring of parents with the instruction that the young should honour everyone who is older (παῖς ὁ πρεσβύτερος), 'since God is oldest'

27 On the latter, with literary parallels, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 80–6. On the depiction of the old in statuary, see Cokayne, *Experiencing*, 11–33; with the Roman fashion for 'verism', the wrinkled face of an older man can become a symbol of dignity, solemnity, and authority.

28 See Parkin, *Old Age*, 76–89; the last case signifies the sense that each age has its own proper pattern of behaviour.

29 The topos of the wise old counsellor is familiar in Greek literature from Homer onwards; for examples, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 335 n. 18, to which add Sir 25.4–6 among other examples in the Jewish tradition.

(*Apion* 2.206).³⁰ For Philo there is an obvious symmetry in the hierarchical relationships which demand respect (*Spec.* 2.224–41): between children and parents, juniors and elders, pupils and teachers, beneficiaries and benefactors, subjects and rulers, slaves and masters. The parallel with parents is particularly stressed: to disrespect an older man or woman would be an indirect, but gross, dishonour to one's parents (*Spec.* 2.237–8). More generally, Philo links older age with wisdom, virtue, maturity, and reason, while the youth (νέοι) are an inherently dangerous phenomenon, associated with upheaval and revolution (νεωτεροποιία; νεωτερίζειν, *Sob.* 6–29).³¹ Such political terms alert us to the cross-over between the household and the state. In politics, the division between the two generations, the old and the young, is as old as Homer, whose portrait of the wise (but garrulous) old Nestor constituted a stock figure (*Il.* 1.247–51; 2.369–72, etc.). The famous Athenian debate on the Sicilian Expedition (Thucydides *Hist.* 6.8–23) is turned by Nikias into a contest between the older and wiser generation (the γεράιτεροι or πρεσβύτεροι led by himself, against the young, headstrong, and madly ambitious youngsters (νέοι, led by Alcibiades, aged 35); needless to say, the political victory of the young led to military disaster. The ideological ramifications of age are spelled out even more clearly in Plutarch's treatise 'Whether an old man should engage in public affairs' (*Mor.* 783b–797f). Here Plutarch argues that an older politician should not 'retire' from public life (all the alternatives are dishonourable and 'womanish'), but should continue to offer to the rest of society, and particularly to the young, the benefits of their superior experience, prudence, and wisdom. The young may be physically stronger, but they are addicted to honour, to competition, and to show, and are ruled by strong impulses (790c–d). The older, by contrast, have an established advantage in experience and thus in good sense (φροντίς); they are by definition οἱ νοῦν ἔχοντες (788a–e; 789d; 797e). And this distinction makes the power differential wholly *natural*: it is of the essence of youth to obey, of old age to rule (πειθαρχικὸν ἢ νεότης, ἡγεμονικὸν δὲ τὸ γῆρας, 789e).³²

The philosophical discussion of this topic is equally revealing. Cicero's famous treatise *De Senectute* carefully counters four arguments that old age is an unhappy

30 For discussion, see my *Flavius Josephus, Translation and Commentary*. Vol. 10. *Against Apion* (Leiden: Brill, 2006) *ad loc.* Elsewhere, Josephus' narrative assumes that the young are lower in ἄξια and thus take lower places at the table (*Ant.* 12.210); the same assumption is present in Luke 22.26 (the νεώτερος is normally in the humble role of the δακονῶν). Cf. Sir 32.3–9 on the right to speak at banquets.

31 According to Philo, the Essenes do not admit young men, 'since the character of such are unstable with a waywardness corresponding to the immaturity of their age' (*Hypoth.* 11.3); they sit in rows in their synagogues, the younger below the older (*Prob.* 81). Cf. the ideal community of the Therapeutae, where the younger members serve the older (*Contempl.* 70–2).

32 Plato would have strongly approved: he takes it for granted that the 'older' will rule the 'younger' in any just political system (*Resp.* 412c, 465a; *Leg.* 659d, 690a).

and burdensome period of life (namely, that it removes us from active pursuits; that it weakens our bodies; that it deprives us of almost every pleasure; and that it brings us nearer to death). Cicero (through his mouthpiece Cato) will not allow any of these claims to devalue old age: they are either half truths or, from the perspective of philosophy, describe conditions which are positively advantageous – after all, with the passions dimmed, there is more room for virtue! Although Cicero knows the stereotype of old men as morose and irascible (*Sen.* 65), he disputes its universal application. More positively, he associates old age with *au-toritas*, *consilium*, and *sententia* (*Sen.* 17). Busy in their own (more intellectual) ways, old men can offer the young wisdom and good sense, a *maturitas* (*Sen.* 33) like that of ripe fruits on a tree, just before they fall (*Sen.* 5, 71).³³ Sometimes in this treatise (written age 62), Cicero deploys a four-age schema of ‘boyhood’ (*pueritia*), ‘youth’ (*adulescentia*), ‘settled age’ (*aetas constans* or *media*), and ‘old age’ (*senectus*; e.g., *Sen.* 33, 76) but generally this resolves to a simpler scheme of ‘young’ and ‘old’, in which the wisdom of age can be contrasted to the immaturity and wild *voluptates* of youth (*Sen.* 17–26, 39–50).³⁴ For a Stoic, or indeed anyone in a philosophical tradition where mind is valued over body, older age provides the perfect conditions for the full display of virtue; it is a period not of decline but of ever greater moral development.

We should note here the ideological work of such texts (‘ideological’ in the strong sense of sustaining asymmetrical relations of power): age and youth are carefully defined to maintain the status quo as both *natural* and *morally necessary*. In the simple polarity of ‘younger’ and ‘older’, an older man can never be classed as ‘too old’; if there is no final category of ‘senile’ into which to decline, the ‘old’ can continue to compare themselves advantageously with the ‘young’ for as long as it suits them to do so. The right of the older to rule is vigorously asserted: that is the reward (γέρας) that goes with old age (γῆρας, Plutarch *Mor.* 789f). I am not claiming that this is the perspective of everyone in the Roman world: the fact that the philosophers have to work to extol the benefits of age indicates that the subject is contestable and contested.³⁵ But it is clear that where age, however

33 As one might expect, little positive attention is given by Cicero or other ancient authors to older women, who are quite frequently (though unflatteringly) depicted in statuary. The old woman still desperate for sex, or addicted to drink, is a common object of scorn or satire; see O. Musso, ‘Anus ebria’, *Atene e Roma* 13 (1968) 29–31; Cokayne, *Experiencing*, 134–52.

34 In the same vein, Seneca admits only a simple bipolarity: ‘youth’ (*adulescentia*, sometimes twinned with *pueritia*) and ‘seniority’ (*senectus*). The latter is the time when the mind is at its full bloom (*Ep.* 26.2), when the apple is perfectly ripe (*Ep.* 12.4). Although the body may be comparatively weak, so are its vices, while the mind enjoys *tranquillitas* and *modestia* (*Ep.* 26.3).

35 There are certainly cases in antiquity where those considered ‘too old’ are dismissed as ‘stupid’ or ‘useless’; see e.g., Josephus *Ant.* 12.172–3; Thucydides *Hist.* 2.44.4. In CD 10.4–10 the office of judge is removed from anyone over the age of 60, ‘for on account of man’s sin his

loosely defined, becomes a criterion for power – and there is good evidence that in the political sphere most men in power were definable as ‘older,’ that is, in their 40s and 50s³⁶ – it has developed a structural significance which requires continual legitimation and reinforcement. Since age could be used as a mechanism for the distribution, and eventual rotation, of power, discourse about it is by no means politically innocent; we should expect its presence or absence in early Christian texts to be similarly significant.

3. Age Instructions in the Pauline Tradition

Space does not permit more than a survey of four texts which lie broadly in the Pauline tradition. They are strikingly similar in their assumptions and ideologies of age, illuminated by the context we have just set.

i) *1 Peter*

Despite its language about charismatic endowment (1 Pet 4.7–11), the opening verses of 1 Pet 5 indicate that respect is due to age in the Christian community. It is πρεσβύτεροι who are exhorted to ‘shepherd’ the flock, and not from greed (5.2).³⁷ Even if the term πρεσβύτερος refers to an ‘office’, it is clear that only ‘older’ people are expected to wield this authority, for the corresponding injunction is to ‘the younger’ (νεώτεροι, 5.5) – which is not a junior ‘office’, but an age-category, the younger people in the churches.³⁸ They are issued with one simple instruction: ὑποτάγητε πρεσβυτέροις (5.5); as normal, youth defers to age. The unequal distribution of power is hardly qualified by the following instruction that all should show humility to one another; in terms of ‘submission’ there is no ethos of reciprocity. What we find here is precisely what we noted in the ideologically driven literature: vagueness in definition of the categories ‘older’ and ‘younger’, accompanied by the firm smack of order.

ii) *1 Clement*

Clement’s letter to Corinth displays the outrage caused when this proper hierarchy is not observed. Although the details are unclear, it appears that there

days were shortened, and because of God’s wrath against the inhabitants of the earth, he decided to remove knowledge from them before they completed their days’; cf. CD 14.6–11; 1QSa 2.7 (the tottering aged are excluded from the congregation).

36 Parkin, *Old Age*, 100: ‘we might say as a generalization that most power (as opposed to less tangible respect) lay not with those over the age of 60, but with those in their 40s and 50s.’

37 On the avarice or meanness of the older generation, see above, n. 28.

38 See discussion by E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 227, 233; N. Brox, *Der Erste Petrusbrief* (Zürich: Benziger, 1979) 226–7, 233–5. The latter argues that πρεσβύτεροι both in 5.1 and 5.5 means ‘elders’ (as an office); but even if so, the age connotations of the term are clear in the contrast of 5.5.

has been some 'revolt' (στάσις) against the πρεσβύτεροι (47.6); whether this comes from within their ranks, or from outside, the strategy of Clement throughout is to reinforce the authority of the duly constituted 'elders' (οἱ καθεσταμένοι πρεσβύτεροι, 54.2).³⁹ One means to this end is to construct a chain of contrasts, each shocking in its implication that order has been overturned: the factionalism that has broken out in Corinth is conducted by the ἄτιμοι against the ἔντιμοι, the ἄδοξοι against the ἔνδοξοι, the ἄφρονες against the φρόνιμοι, and the νέοι against the πρεσβύτεροι (3.3). Although these four antitheses are not precise equivalents, the associations are telling: the 'young' are classed alongside the 'disreputable' and the 'senseless' – presumably because they lack the age-entitlement to honour and wisdom.⁴⁰ A second tactic is to reinforce obedience to the 'elders' by placing them in a network of relationships requiring proper submission to the κἀνων ὑποτάγης (1.3). Thus in 1 Clement 1 the Corinthians are praised for their previous orderly conduct, and in 1 Clement 21 exhorted, in very similar terms, to renew this order. In both cases obeying their leaders and 'paying proper honour' (τιμὴ ἢ καθήκουσα) to their 'elders' is juxtaposed with expectations that the young (νέοι) are taught to 'think moderate and respectful thoughts' (μέτρια καὶ σεμνὰ νοεῖν, 1.3), and are instructed in the discipline of the Lord (21.6). The hierarchical relationship between 'the older' and 'the young' is closely allied to that presupposed in the family, with the normal assumption that the young tend to excessive and irresponsible behaviour.⁴¹ It is not quite clear here whether the πρεσβύτεροι represent an informal age-group or a formal office.⁴² But that suits Clement's rhetoric well: respect for the office of 'elder' is boosted by its association with 'old age', while respect for the older members of the congregation is boosted by their association in nomenclature with the emerging office of 'elder'. In either case, age proves if not a prerequisite at least a distinct advantage for aspiring leaders in communities who share Clement's ideology.

iii) *The Pastorals*

A similar set of assumptions, and rhetorics, is to be found in the Pastoral epistles. There is the same ambiguity about the label πρεσβύτεροι, which in some cases seems to designate an age-group (1 Tim 5.1–2; cf. Titus 2.2–6), and in others

39 On this revolt and its social causes, see B. E. Bowe, *A Church in Crisis: Ecclesiology and Paraenesis in Clement of Rome* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988); D. G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) 238–80.

40 Since Clement's phraseology is partially drawn from Isa 3.5, we should be cautious in reading historical reality from his description of the parties; see Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 247 n. 58.

41 Cf. 1 Clem 63.3, where there is praise for faithful and 'temperate' (σώφρονες) men, 'who have lived blamelessly among us from youth to old age.' The advantage of the old is apparent; they have a life-long Christian commitment to prove their worth in the community.

42 See Campbell, *Elders*, 211–6.

an office (1 Tim 5.17, 19; Titus 1.5; cf. τὸ πρεσβυτέριον, 1 Tim 4.14). The term may be in transition, or the subject of subtle political redescription;⁴³ but all its uses build upon the special respect accorded to age. Titus 2.1–5 represents many of the classic cultural assumptions about age. Older men (πρεσβῦται) are to be sober, serious, and moderate – the virtues one would expect in those who have left behind what the Pastor elsewhere terms ‘youthful passions’ (νεωτερικαὶ ἐπιθυμίαι, 2 Tim 2.22). Older women are to control their tongues and their appetite for drink.⁴⁴ Such women, however, have a crucial role to play in socialising the younger generation of wives (αἱ νέαι) into the proper family ethos, to ensure that they are domestic, motherly, and obedient to their husbands (Titus 2.4–5). Younger men (νεώτεροι) are to be moderate in everything (σωφρονεῖν περὶ πάντα), learning to shed youthful excess so they are fit to be, in turn, the wise older generation. In 1 Timothy, where the addressee is presented as young (4.12; see below), care is to be taken as to how the older generation are exhorted and corrected. Just as slaves are not to be insolent to their Christian masters (1 Tim 6.1–2), so older men must not be rudely rebuked (πρεσβυτέρῳ μὴ ἐπιπλήξῃς), but exhorted ‘as fathers’ (1 Tim 5.1), older women ‘as mothers’, and the younger generation (νεωτέρους and νεωτέρας) as brothers and sisters. Again, we note, there are only two categories (older and younger), no ‘middle aged’. And the family metaphor is significant:⁴⁵ it indicates that in a community which thinks of itself as ‘the household of God’ (1 Tim 3.15), the patterns of respect for the older generation in the family are likely to be replicated in social relations within the church.

iv) *Polycarp*

In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp includes a number of comments about the generational divide which tally precisely with what we have discovered thus far, but add a further moral tone. In *Phil.* 5–6 he first instructs the ‘younger men’ (νεώτεροι) to exercise self-control. The dangers here are ‘impurity’ and ‘the desires of the world’, and, considering what was generally believed about young men’s libido, it is not surprising that the following list of vices – a shortened version of 1 Cor 6.9–11 – is entirely focused on *sexual* misdemeanour. To avoid this, or any other such ‘aberrant behaviour’ (ἄτοπα), the young must be subject to ‘the elders and deacons’ (τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις καὶ διακόνοις), as to God and Christ; one could hardly devise a stronger legitimation of the authority of the leaders,

43 See F. Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) 104–11; Campbell, *Elders*, 176–205; I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Letters* (ICC; London: T. & T. Clark, 1999) 170–81.

44 For the stereotype of the drunken old woman, see above, n. 33.

45 For parallels in inscriptions and literature, where older people are to be honoured as parents, contemporaries as siblings, see M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 72.

who are simply presumed to be of the older generation. Meanwhile, the ‘elders’, who have the power to correct and care for the rest of the congregation, are warned to avoid the usual vices of age – the tendency to be cantankerous and money-grabbing (6.1; cf. 11.1–4). Rather, they are to be merciful, generous, unprejudiced, free from anger, and mild in their judgement of others. We have the impression of a community where leadership is more or less neatly aligned with age, and where the younger generation will have to prove their ability to ‘rein themselves in’ (5.3) over a protracted period before they, in turn, can fill the role of ‘elders’.

4. Two Exceptions that Prove the Rule

Lest the picture appear over-simple, we should note two passages which suggest that, on occasion, leaders in the churches might be comparatively young. In both cases it is clear that this is problematic and exceptional, and words are carefully chosen to validate this unusual phenomenon. The fact that it happens at all indicates that early Christian practice did not always match its age-presumptions; but the justification provided for these exceptions proves that they did little to disrupt the normal assumptions concerning the authority of age.

In the first of these texts, 1 Tim 4.12, instruction is given to ‘Timothy’ not to let anyone ‘despise’ him because of his youth (μηδεὶς σου τῆς νεότητος καταφρονεῖτω). The notice may go back to early memory of Timothy, or serve as an interpretation of Pauline fears on his behalf (1 Cor 16.11; cf. Titus 2.15). In this pseudonymous letter, such a fictionalised instruction has been taken by Brox to suggest that young leaders were not untypical in the circles addressed by the Pastorals.⁴⁶ To counteract this disadvantage, Timothy must make himself an ‘example’ to others (examples are normally expected in the older generation), and, as we have seen, he must be specially careful to address older men and women with respect (5.1–2). He is also reminded of the χάρισμα which was given to him through prophecy (4.14) – but given through the laying on of hands by the council of elders (τὸ πρεσβυτέριον)! In other words, Timothy’s youthful authority is not an example of ‘charisma’ which escapes or challenges the ‘traditional’ authority of the older generation. What at first sight appears to circumvent the due process of age-qualification turns out to be authentic, and authenticated, only when the elders have appointed him to his task. That they might appoint such a young person indicates that age is not a *sine qua non* for leadership in such

46 N. Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Regensburg: Pustet, 4th ed., 1969) 178–9; cf. J. Roloff, *Der Erste Brief an Timotheus* (EKK; Zürich: Benziger, 1988) 251; but the inference is not wholly secure. Cf. N. Brox, ‘Pseudo-Paulus und Pseudo-Ignatius. Einige Topoi altchristlicher Pseudepigraphie’, *VC* 30 (1976) 181–8.

churches; but in the context of the Pastorals as a whole, this disregard of the age criterion is clearly an exception.

Our second text offers a real case of a youthful leader, in the role of overseer (ἐπίσκοπος). In his letter to the *Magnesians* (3.1), Ignatius urges the church not to take advantage of Damas because of his age: they are to accord him all proper respect (as if he were ‘old’), as even the ‘holy elders’ have done (overriding their natural scorn of the young). The crucial justification for this unusual phenomenon is then presented: his youthful status/condition (νεωτερικὴ τάξις) is only an outward appearance (φαινομένη),⁴⁷ and the elders, seeing through this deceptive exterior, have honoured Damas ‘as one who is wise in God’ (ὡς φρονίμῳ ἐν θεῷ).⁴⁸ Wisdom is, of course, precisely what one would *not* expect in a young man, but would naturally associate with the old, and it is Damas’ ‘wisdom in God’ which equips him to play his unusual role. Heavy sanctions are added: one must defer to Damas as if to God, and not with hypocrisy, for that would be detected by the divine ἐπίσκοπος (3.2). One has the impression that Damas’ job would have been a lot easier if his hair had been that little bit greyer and his brow a little more wrinkled.⁴⁹

5. The Silence of Paul

Finally, we may return to our question about Paul. Is it significant that, in comparison with these later texts written in his name or in his tradition, and despite the depiction in Acts (14.23), Paul did not appoint πρεσβύτεροι in his churches? Leadership was indeed appointed, or at least emerged (1 Thess 5.12–13; 1 Cor 16.15–16; Phil 1.1), but it was not characterised by terms depicting age. Age differentials are not included in the formula of Gal 3.28, alongside the nullified labels of ethnicity, gender, and legal status; but are they implicitly ignored in Pauline anthropology?

As always, silence can be interpreted in more than one way. We might conclude that Paul really thought no differently from everyone else on this matter. As

47 For the translation of τάξις see J. B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*. Part 2. *S. Ignatius, S. Polycarp*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1889) 113–4; BAGD s.v.

48 Following the reading in A, rather than φρονίμους in G and L; so Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 114; B. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1 (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2003) 244. For the notion of a young man as wise as an elder, cf. Susanna 44–50 (Theodotion), regarding Daniel; *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.1 (a man under 50 may be appointed bishop ‘if he has behaved from his youth like a much older person’).

49 I am grateful to Dr. Joel Kaminsky for pointing me to an apposite anecdote in the Babylonian Talmud. When Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah was only 18 years old he was appointed head of the Sanhedrin and there was concern that the masses would not respect him because of his youthful appearance; so a miracle occurred and his beard turned white overnight (*b. Ber.* 28a).

we have seen, one did not have to speak of people's ages in every context (age often goes unmarked), but the fact that Paul did once pull rank, or evoke pity, as a πρεσβύτες (Phlm 9) might suggest that he associated authority with age.⁵⁰ His appeal to his converts to think no longer as παῖδια but as τέλειοι (1 Cor 14.20; cf. 1 Cor 2.6; 13.11; Phil 3.12–15; Col 1.28; 4.12) could be taken to indicate that he linked Christian maturation to experience and age. Moreover, it has been argued that in churches founded by Paul leadership would naturally gravitate to householders and hosts, and thus to the *paterfamilias* or equivalent – in any case (given the importance of age in the domestic context) to the oldest generation.⁵¹

On the other hand, there are both sociological and theological indications of a quite contrary conclusion. As a first-generation conversionist sect, the Pauline movement could hardly afford to limit leadership to an older generation (there might be few among the converts in any particular place), and its charismatic features could break with the traditional structures of authority associated with age. Just as Luke, citing Joel, can imagine both young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams (Acts 2.17), spiritual gifts in Pauline theology are not distributed by age. There is no indication that prophecy or teaching, or even apostleship, must be in the hands of the older generation (1 Cor 12–14), and this not by accidental omission but because the structures of power in the Pauline churches escape both legal and traditional frameworks.⁵² Theologically, one may relate this to the emergence in Paul of an alternative, apocalyptic anthropology. If the wisdom of the world is made foolish by the message of the cross, and if the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 1.18; 7.31), one can hardly expect the normal associations between age, wisdom, and authority to remain intact. In the καινὴ κτίσις (Gal 6.15; 2 Cor 5.17) the believer is reconstituted by dependence on the Spirit, who is the source of wisdom and of the moral qualities that constitute growth in Christ. It is not clear that an older person must be necessarily wiser 'in Christ', and if a believer goes astray, it is the πνευματικοί who are to correct him, not the πρεσβύτεροι (Gal 6.1). Experience of life in 'the present evil age' (Gal 1.4) can hardly qualify one for leadership in the emerging new creation, while the gifts

50 Cf. the presumption that the first-born son (Jesus) has a higher rank than his brothers (Rom 8.29); as father (or mother) of his churches, Paul assumes authority over them (e.g., 1 Cor 4.14–15), but this lies more in his parentage than in his superior 'age'.

51 So Campbell, *Elders*, 97–140, arguing that 'elder' (a general term of honour) does not emerge in Pauline times, since each church had its own leader. It emerges only later when churches are collectively represented by groups of leaders, called elders. But it is still unclear whether Paul would have accepted an age-term as a label of leadership.

52 The issue is more complex than can be discussed here; see B. Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Lund: Gleerup, 1978).

and fruits of the Spirit are acquired not by the passage of time but by the distribution of grace.

Thus, from related sociological and theological angles, it is possible to find traces in Paul of an alternative ideology, challenging the structuring assumptions of Roman society. But if so, one can understand why this did not last. As soon as time began to pass, and converts could be expected to mature in the faith, the typical links between seniority, experience, and wisdom would naturally emerge. If Christians conceived of themselves as 'growing into salvation' (1 Pet 2.2), they could plot a path of increasing spiritual maturation through the life-cycle; and via the normal processes of routinisation, leadership would be largely restricted to those qualified by their social standing, domestic or otherwise. Thus in time 'the young' are told to knuckle down and respect their 'elders'. But, arguably, there remains within the Christian tradition a trace of an earlier, alternative, vision of a social structure that is Spirit-led and age-blind.⁵³

53 Gnilka traces in subsequent Christian literature the discussion of 'age' as a spiritual, rather than a physical, phenomenon, and thus the capacity to recognise the spiritual maturity of the young. This discourse has its roots more in philosophy (e.g., the topos of the *puer senex*) than in charismatic freedom, but the exception texts noted above (1 Tim 4.12; Ignatius *Mag.* 3.1) played their part in this discussion (*Aetas Spiritualis*, 170–3, 244).